



VINTAGE

DEAR GEORGE
AND
OTHER STORIES

HELEN SIMPSON

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About the Book

In her second collection of short stories, Helen Simpson continues to explore ideas of independence, solitude, marriage, sex and babies with her characteristic blend of comedy and lyricism. Here are tales of young love – successful or thwarted, intense or comic.

From a wedding day for one, through the knotty problems of babies, their conception, arrival and impact on adult lives, to a Lothario receiving his just deserts, and the title story, where a schoolgirl's erotic daydreams during Shakespeare homework produce eventual blushes of horror.

About the Author

Helen Simpson is the author of *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*, *Dear George*, *Hey Yeah Right Get a Life*, *In-Flight Entertainment* and *A Bunch of Fives*. In 1991 she was chosen as the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year and won the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1993 she was chosen as one of Granta's twenty Best of Young British Novelists. She has also received the Hawthornden prize, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters' E.M. Forster Award. She lives in London.

ALSO BY HELEN SIMPSON

Four Bare Legs in a Bed
Hey Yeah Right Get A Life

Dear George and Other Stories

Helen Simpson



Dear George

SHE WAS TRYING to write an essay on the various sorts of humour in *As You Like It* at the same time, which didn't help. To her right was a pad of file paper on which she scrawled scathing comments about Shakespeare as they occurred. In front of her was her mother's block of Basildon Bond. She had used four sheets so far.

Dear George, she wrote for the fifth time, and added a curly little comma like a tadpole. She sat back and admired the comma. That was pure luck when it turned out like that. Sometimes if you concentrated on something too hard you ruined it.

She sauntered over to the mirror and stared at herself for a few minutes. 'You gorgeous creature you,' she murmured, sly but sincere, ogling herself from sideways on. A yawn overtook her and she watched her tongue arch like a leaf. Then she performed a floozie's bump and grind back to the *Complete Works*.

Jaq: What stature is she of?

Orl: Just as high as my heart.

George was tall, that was the best thing about him. She would be higher than his heart, of course, probably about level with his Adam's apple, but that was good enough for her. Already her feet were seven-and-a-halves, and she was still not yet fifteen.

She turned back to her latest copy of the letter to George. She knew its phrases by heart now, and they were as spontaneous as two hours' effort could make them. 'Daniel

Minter asked me to tell you that the Grindley match has been rearranged for the 16th because he thought you were coming back to the Bio Lab, but you didn't. So I thought I'd drop you a line to let you know. He asked me because I had to be there till five o'clock on the last day of term, collecting the results from our petri dishes.'

The handwriting was vital, that was what she was trying to perfect as she toiled over copy after copy. There must be nothing round or childish about it. She was dabbling now with italics like barbed wire. Sophistication was what she aimed for. A looped *f* would still creep in if she didn't watch it, or a silly swan-backed *s*.

There was her fat little sister, rattling the doorknob to be let in.

'I won't talk,' came the promises through the keyhole. 'I'll just sit on your bed and watch you.'

'Go away,' she drawled. 'You are banal.'

Silence. She thought of her sister's big baffled sheep's eyes and this made her giggle crossly and feel cruel.

'Banal!' she bellowed. 'Look it up in the dictionary.'

Her sister rushed heftily off downstairs towards the bookcase. From another part of the house drifted a weak howl from their mother, who was trying to get the new baby to sleep.

Disgust jerked her out of her seat. How *could* she, at *her* age, it was so *selfish* of her. It was just showing off. As everyone at school had pointed out, she'd probably been trying for a boy this time, so *served her right*.

She would never be able to bring George home. It would be too awful. Her mother would probably try to breastfeed it in front of him. She started to wriggle and giggle in horror.

Cel: I pray you, bear with me, I cannot go no further.

Tou: For my part, I had rather bear with you than bear you: yet I should bear no cross if I did bear you, for I

think you have no money in your purse.

She picked up her pen and scribbled, 'This is obviously meant to be funny, but it is not. It is rubbish. People only say this is good because it is Shakespeare. It is really boring. It is not even grammar, e.g. I cannot go no further.' The hexagonal plastic shaft of the biro turned noisily in the grip of her front teeth as she paused to read through what she had written. Then she crossed out 'boring' and printed 'banal' in its place.

'Commonplace. Trite. Hackneyed,' came through the keyhole with a lot of heavy breathing; then a pause and, 'What do *they* mean?'

'Go away,' she said. 'Ask Mum.'

Served her mother right if she used up all the stamps and Basildon Bond. Spitefully she folded and inserted each of the four early drafts into separate envelopes, sealed them and wrote out George's address four times with self-consciously soppy relish. She had no intention of sending any of them, and stuck on the stamps in a spirit of wicked waste. Later today she would tear them up to show she had style, and send off this perfect fifth version.

She read it through again. It was making her cringe now, she couldn't see it fresh any more. She'd read those phrases so often, she couldn't tell whether they came across as casual or childish or too keen or what.

'I wish I was in 6B with you, all the GCSEs out of the way. Hope you have a good holiday. If you would possibly feel like meeting for any reason, I am fairly free this holiday. Maybe hear from you soon. Ciao.'

Was ciao too trendy? She hadn't thought it was till this moment. She couldn't put Yours sincerely, and shook at the thought of Love. Cheers was what the boys in 6B said to each other, but she wouldn't stoop that low.

'Dear George,' she scribbled again, this time on a naughty impulse and a sheet of scrap paper, 'I don't know I could

stand to go out with you if Every Time We Said Goodbye you said Chiz instead. Why do you do it? It makes you sound really thick. Chiz chiz chiz chiz chiz. Try Ciao, it's more stylish – it's Italian in case you didn't know and it means the same as chiz – you look a bit Italian which is partly why I fancy you.'

The mournfulness of his image caught her, stopped her ticking for a second or two as a cameo of large meaty nobility filled her mind's eye.

She reread what she had written, then, sniggering, clattering her teeth together in enamelled applause, dipping her head down so that her hair piled up on one side of the paper in a foresty rustle, she scrawled, 'You can't be *that* thick. Anyone can have bad luck in GCSEs, ha ha, though two retakes in history is a bit much.'

Cupping her chin on the half shell of her hands, she made her mouth into a kissing shape. With the tip of her tongue she tenderly tapped inside each of the teeth in her upper jaw.

'I would like to feel your hands on the back of my waist (25"), with the thumbs round my sides,' she scrawled, chewing invisible gum, 'but only if they aren't sweaty. If you have wet hands it's all over before it's started, sorry Gorgeous George but that's the way I am.'

Holding her hands up in front of her, using them like boned fans to block the light, she spotted an incipient hangnail poking up from the cuticle of her left thumb and fell on it like a falcon, tearing at it with famished energy. When she had made it bleed she lost interest and stared out of the window.

There on the back lawn her galumphing little sister was helping their mother hang out baby vests and babygros and other baby rubbish in the sun. Her mother had it strapped to her front in a hideous pink nylon sling.

'No style,' she muttered, curling her lip. She pulled the curtains on them and made a warm gloom.

Once the candle was lit and positioned on her homework table, she was able to ignore the worst aspects of her room, like the brainlessly 'cheerful' duvet cover with its sun, moon and poppy field. Her face's reflection was a blanched heart in the mirror on the back wall. When she came home on the last train she saw her reflection in the window like that, pale and pointed, looking sideways, fleering at the bugle eyes which were so very blot-like and black above cream-coloured cheeks. She had a vision of George coming up to her as she sat illegally alone in her accustomed first-class carriage, and saw his difficult smile.

Hugging herself as she rocked to and fro on the folding chair, adjusting her balance as it threatened to jack-knife her thighs to stomach in its fold-up maw, her hands became George's, firm and pressing around her waist. She stood up. Now one crept forward and undid the buttons of her shirt, stroked her neck down past the collar bone. Catching sight of herself in the mirror tweaking her own breast, the silly lost expression left her face instantly.

She reached across for Shakespeare and flicked through until she came to her latest discovery in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Holding her left hand palm out to her reflection, she touched wrist to wrist in the chill glass and murmured,

There is gold and here
My bluest veins to kiss, a hand that kings
Have lipped, and trembled kissing.

This produced a reluctant simper and a slow shudder which wriggled through from head to foot finishing with a sigh. After a minute she tried it again but this time it did not work.

Lifting her knees and pointing her toes like a cartoon of stealth, she fell back onto her *As You Like It* essay with an angry groan.

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino
That o'er the green corn field did pass
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding ding.

'Anybody could write this sort of stuff,' she wrote. 'If Madonna put it in one of her lyrics, English teachers everywhere would say, how moronic.' Then she dashed off an inspired demolition job on Touchstone before losing her drift.

Flicking through the rice-paper leaves, she came to another juicy bit.

Des: O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

Oth: Down, strumpet!

Des: Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!

Oth: Nay, if you strive -

There was George, big George, looming like a tower in the half-dark, and herself in a white nightdress with pintucks from shoulder seam to waist, quite plain, no lace, his hot hands round her neck . . . She inhaled slowly and closed her eyes; leaned forward and pressed a bit against her windpipe with her thumbs; blushing smirked; then felt a chill tinge of shame, a prickling under her arms like cactus hairs, and busily started to biro a blue swallow on the inside of her elbow.

Tattoos only lasted when the ink got into your bloodstream.

Maybe she would get her ears pierced this afternoon at Shangri La, she thought, though that was supposed to hurt a lot too, there was no anaesthetic, they just shot a spike through the lobe with a little gun like a paper punch.

She sniggered as she remembered something rude. According to Valerie Mitchell from 6B, who was a Saturday

girl at Shangri La and who was doing Louis XIV for a special project, the Sun King's bed was heaped with pillows stuffed with his mistresses' hair. 'And not with the hair from their *heads*,' Valerie had leered.

Now she described this conversation to George in her make-believe letter, and even enclosed a clipping to launch his collection. When it came to signing off this time, she added fifty smacking Xs. She then spat on the paper before smearing it with her fist. Across the envelope's seal she wrote SWALK in lipstick and from the Queen's mouth on the stamp she drew a balloon saying, 'Who's a pretty boy then.'

'*Please* come and play,' whined her sister from the other side of the door. 'You've been up here for ages now and I don't believe you're just doing revision.'

'Go away,' she said.

'We could go roller skating,' said her sister.

'Mum won't let me go out till I've done the washing up,' she said, 'and I'm refusing on moral grounds since it's not my turn, so I *can't* go out.'

Once her sister had gone stump-stump-stumping off downstairs, she crept along the landing, pausing to stare and bite her thumb at the rumpled bedroom shared by her mother and stepfather. Then, when she was safely locked in the bathroom, she transferred all the plastic ducklings, sailors, mechanically spouting whales and dinghies from the bath to the lavatory and closed the lid on them.

During the chin-high soak which followed, she lay poaching in water so hot that a clear Plimsoll line appeared on her skin, all fiery lobster-coloured flesh below the water's surface while above stayed white and sweat-pearled. The little bathroom was dense with steam, the wallpaper's paisley invisible and the gloss-painted ceiling lustrous with moisture. She closed her eyes and saw George opening her letter, his crooked smile, his reaching for the telephone. They talked with sophisticated ease, and soon they were sharing a fondue down at the Mousetrap.